On Ash Wednesday

By

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Summary by AI

*This document is a theological reflection/Sermon on **Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent** that situates them within the broader movement of Epiphany and the Christian understanding of God's saving love revealed in Jesus Christ. The author presents Lent not as rule-keeping or symbolic deprivation, but as a **reorientation of one's entire being toward God**, expressed through repentance, justice, mercy, and reconciliation.*

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*The reflection begins by linking **Epiphany and Lent**. Epiphany is described as the season of recognizing "the showing forth of the saving nature of God" in Christ, "God manifest, the Word made flesh." Lent continues this recognition but shifts the focus to human response: "the emphasis is on our response to our recognition of that Gift, our acting on our recognition of that Gift". Ash Wednesday therefore marks a moment of honest self-examination—seeing where one stands in relation to God and where one has lived toward self rather than toward God.*

*A central theological theme is **being and healing through Christ**. Drawing on Saint Paul, the author states that "it is from God that all things come and that it is through Christ all things are." Human beings are fully themselves only insofar as Christ is active in their lives. The text makes the strong claim that "all healing, then, is from God through Christ," and that "all being and coming into being – healing – is a manifestation of the saving nature of God's love in Christ at work in the world," whether that healing is physical, mental, or spiritual. The imposition of ashes reinforces this perspective, reminding believers that their very existence is from God and oriented toward God: "remember you are dust and to dust you shall return".*

*Lent is repeatedly defined as **orientation rather than abstinence**. The author writes explicitly, "the season of Lent is not about rules or giving up something. Rather, it is about orientation, reorientation to God". This reorientation is made visible in action. Because the Church is the body of Christ in the world, believers are called to make their lives "a living manifestation of the saving nature of God's love in Christ." Healing occurs as God's love works through believers to heal others: "we are healed by letting the saving nature of God's love in Christ work through ourselves to heal others and ourselves*

*The document grounds this understanding of repentance in **Isaiah 58:3–10**, which defines true fasting not as ritual humiliation but as justice and mercy. God's chosen fast is described as "to loose the bonds of injustice… to share your bread with the hungry… and bring the homeless poor into your house." These acts are not optional moral add-ons but the concrete form of reconciliation with God. The author states plainly: "God calls us to reconciliation with Him… through our reconciliation with each other". When believers live this way, "your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly".*

*The reflection also warns against **self-centered piety and false worship**. Quoting Jesus, the author cautions against practicing religion "to be seen by others," identifying this as a symptom of living toward self rather than toward God. Similarly, storing up earthly treasures reveals where the heart truly lies: "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also". Such orientations close people off from the saving love of God and from authentic relationship with others.*

*A major portion of the text addresses **forgiveness and sin**. The author emphasizes that resentment—toward others or toward oneself—blocks the flow of God's healing love. Forgiveness is essential, because "in not forgiving we pay a price." When forgiveness is withheld, believers "cut ourselves off from the Sunlight of God's Holy Spirit," and thus from life itself. This leads to the stark theological claim: "the wages of sin is death".*

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Drawing on The Anglican Vision by Griffiss, sin is defined not as rule-breaking but as ***"a failure in love"*** *and a breaking of relationship with God and neighbor. Repentance involves acknowledging this failure and allowing it to be taken up into the deeper love of God through Christ. The Eucharist is presented as the model for Christian life: offering oneself to God, being transformed, and made one body with Christ. Sin, therefore, is the failure to carry Eucharistic love into daily life—especially the failure to enact justice, mercy, and compassion.*

The document concludes by presenting Lent as a ***journey back to life in Christ****, marked by reflection, repentance, forgiveness, and renewed commitment to love. By turning back to God and reconciling with one another, believers prepare to share in Christ's resurrection at Easter. The final prayer asks that believers may become instruments of God's light, so that "when others shall call out the LORD through us will answer… 'Here I am'".*

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"Epiphany" is Greek for "revelation, showing forth, manifestation." It is a season of celebrating the showing forth of the saving nature of God in, Jesus' status as not just another prophet, but God manifest, the Word made flesh, Christ. As Christmas calls us to return in kind to God ourselves as He gives Himself to us, Epiphany calls us to recognize God's gift of Himself, the saving nature of God's love in Christ in the past and in our lives today, God manifest in our lives today. During Epiphany, then, the focus was on recognizing the gift to us of God's love in Christ. During Lent the focus continues to be on recognizing His gift, but the emphasis is on our response to our recognition of that gift, our acting on our recognition of that Gift, on our returning in kind to God ourselves as he gives Himself to us in Christ.

Understanding the gift of God's love in Christ involves understanding His sacrifice for us in Christ. And this understanding comes from our own sacrifice, our sacrifice of ourselves to God, in act. Yet to give ourselves to God as He gives Himself to us we need to recognize where we have gone astray, have not done so. Therefore, the season of Lent is also a time of reflection and self examination to discover where/when/in what ways we have not lived to God but rather to ourselves. This is a central theme of Ash Wednesday as is seeing where we stand in relation to God. Such a seeing requires a perspective.

What perspective? What worldview? What way of understanding? Saint Paul tells us that it is from God that all things come and that it is through Christ all things are. It is through Christ that we are, we have being, we live, we are fully who we are by nature, self actualized. Our being at all is from God through Christ. **The extent to which we are who we are by nature, fulfill our nature, is the result of God in Christ at work in our lives.** Further, when we are not fully who by nature we are not self actualized, and move towards being so, which is to say move towards being who we are by nature, move towards fully living, this is healing. Since it is through Christ that we are it is through Him that we come to be fully who we are by nature. **All healing, then, is from God through Christ.** And thus all healing is the result of the saving nature of God in Christ at work in the world**. All being and coming into being – healing - then, is a manifestation of the saving nature of God's love in Christ at work in the world.** *And this is so whether the healing is physical, mental, or spiritual.*

All being, then comes from God. And we are reminded of this today with the imposition of ashes when it is said, "remember you are dust and to dust you shall return," and those ashes are an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace in our recognition of the nature of our relationship with God, of our being to God, of our being from God. **Perspective/Orientation.**

Our orientation to God, our being to God, is made manifest in act, in our sacrifice of our lives to God, giving ourselves to Him as He gives Himself to us in and through Christ in the Unity/Fellowship of His Holy Spirit. Since, we, the Church, are the body of Christ in the world today, it is to making our lives a living manifestation of the saving nature of God's love in Christ – to ministry - that we are **all** called. And it is in answering that call by making our lives a living manifestation of the saving nature of God's love in Christ, by making ourselves vehicles through which that inward and spiritual grace works in our and the lives of others, through us healing others, that we become fully who we are by nature in Christ, that we are healed, healed by thus reconciling with God through each other, the body of Christ in the world today. **I, you, we are healed by letting the saving nature of God's love in Christ work through ourselves to heal others and ourselves.**

And it is in so doing, that we are **transformed** into who we are by nature and we see Christ at work in and through our lives, in and through our Being. ***Fully seeing Christ at work in our lives and our becoming the image in which we are created, then, comes by our transformation into living proclamations of the Word.***

To me, the season of Lent is not about rules or giving up something. Rather, it is about orientation, reorientation to God, reorienting our being, our action, our living to God, reconciling with God in Christ by recognizing the saving nature of God's love for us in Christ and acting on what we see and giving ourselves to God as He in Christ gives Himself to us.

Consider again a passage from our Old Testament reading for today, namely, **Isaiah 58:3-10:**

"Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.
Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.

Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?
Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.
If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday."

God calls us to reconciliation with Him in and through Christ in the *Unity/Fellowship of His Holy Spirit – through our reconciliation with each other*. Our answering his call, our bearing our cross, our sacrifice to God, as the above passage from Isaiah tells us involves:

- **loosen*ing* the bonds of injustice,**
- **undo*ing* the thongs of the yoke,**
- **lett*ing* the oppressed go free,**
- **shar*ing* our bread with the hungry,**
- **bring*ing* the homeless poor into our houses; and**
- **cover*ing* the naked.**

If we answer that call by seeing the saving nature of His love for us in Christ at work in our lives today and **act** on what we see, sacrificing our lives to God, **we are healed in the sacrafice,** by so being transformed into who we are by nature, the divine nature of God in Christ in us. If we answer God's call in Christ and turn and follow Him, unconditionally forgiving and loving ourselves and others, giving ourselves to others as God in Christ gave/gives Himself to us so that **when others cry out, He, through us says "Here I am!**; we not only see and hear Christ in our lives, we feel and live in Christ, reconciling and joining with God in Christ, living in and sharing in the Divine.

By so reconciling and joining with each other we are transfigured by His love in Christ into the Divine nature that we are in His image, and we live, we are – have life in and through Christ in the Unity/Fellowship of His Holy Spirit and abide in His Kingdom here and now. For, we are reconciled with God through Christ in our reconciliation with each other by His Grace in the Unity of His Holy Spirit. We, thus, live to God in our being/living for/to each other. And **His Light, the Light of Christ, the Sunlight of His Holy Spirit, shall break forth *through us* like the dawn, and our healing shall spring up quickly**

But often we fall short. We live to ourselves and not God. In the Gospel for today Jesus tells us, **"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Farther in Heaven."** Here piety can be seen as meaning something like religious practice. Beware of worshiping God in front of others for the sake of being seen by them. To do so is to live to ourselves – worshiping for recognition as opposed to being in a worshiping community, supporting and being with others in their worship by our presence – instead of living to God.

Further, he cautions us not to store up treasures on Earth, **"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."** When we worship to be seen by others or store up treasures on Earth for ourselves, we serve ourselves and not God. We lives to ourselves and not God. **And our so doing is a symptom of where our heart is – *ourselves and not God*!**

We close ourselves off from seeing and living on the basis of the saving nature of God's love in Christ. When we are wronged by others we often develop resentments against them. We judge them – usually negatively – and often look down on them. We do this out of concern for self and thus turn away from those whose action toward us manifest their having gone astray and their need for the saving nature of God's grace through us. *We thus turn away from the very people who need us most, the people who need most the saving nature of God's unconditional love for us and all His creation made known to us in the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ working through us to heal them (and us).* ***And our turning away from them, in turn, manifests our need for the saving nature of God's grace. For in our turning away, we, too, have gone astray.*** On the other hand sometimes when we wrong others we do the same, developing resentments towards ourselves, judge ourselves, look down on ourselves. **What we often tend not to do is forgive, forgive ourselves and others as God in Christ forgives us. And this again is a symptom of where our heart is – our orientation – ourselves and not God, living to ourselves and not God.**

And in not forgiving we pay a price. For when we do not forgive others and ourselves we cut ourselves off from the Sunlight of God's Holy Spirit. We cut ourselves off from the saving nature of God's love in Christ. By not forgiving others we get in the way of our ability to love others, to be manifestations of the sunlight of His Spirit to others, to be living expressions of the saving nature of God's love in Christ. By not forgiving ourselves or not accepting the forgiveness of others we cut ourselves off from receiving the Sunlight of His Spirit, the saving nature of God's love in Christ given to us through others. **By not grounding our lives in unconditionally loving others as we are unconditionally loved by Him who is the Sunlight of the world, forgiving and accepting forgiveness of others, by our thus turning away from ourselves and others, and therefore God, we cut ourselves off from His Light, the Light of Christ, the saving nature of the love of God given us in and through Christ. And we die, we are not. And so it is said, "The wages of sin is death."**

Note that sin has to do with relationships, our relationship with God, a relationship which cannot be extracted from how we relate to one another. In his book entitled **"The Anglican Vision"** Griffiss (1997) notes:

> "My years of worshiping in the Episcopal Church have shown me that in worship I participate in and have communion with God through the story of Jesus, who is God with us. … .
>
> "Also, I began to have a sense of sin and failure that went beyond the naughtiness of

childhood. I began to see that sin was not simply breaking a rule or a law, doing something my parents had told me not to do or my peers thought was wrong. Confessing my sin in the context of worship helped me to see that sin involved the breaking of a relationship *[me- breaking one's relationship with God]*; it was a failure in love. Consequently, I slowly came to see that forgiveness was something more than being patted on the head and told that all was well, or being approved of by those who mattered. Forgiveness asked something of me, and I began to learn the meaning of repentance.

In a novel that was popular some years ago, one of the characters says in effect, "Love means never having to day your sorry." I am not sure what the character in the novel meant; perhaps she did not know herself. But through the Eucharist I learned that love , both of God and neighbor, *does* require saying you are sorry; it means the deep sorrow of knowing that you have broken a relationship through your sin. Repentance is not beating oneself on the head; it is acknowledging a failure of love, a failure to give and receive. Through worship I was being shown how my sin and my failure to love could be taken up into the deeper love of God in Christ. I was being shown something of the responsibility of saying "I'm sorry" and of forgiveness as the acceptance of responsibility for personal failure, and acceptance made possible because one is loved" (pp. 9-10). … .

… . I learned that in worship I was not just receiving something from God; I was also offering or giving something of myself to God in Jesus Christ. This was a major step in discovering a truth which has become increasingly important to me as I have gone on in my journey with God: that who I am—all of my complex emotions and desires, and my mind with all of its doubts, conflicts, hopes, and fears—has something to do with God. I can still remember the impact it made upon me to realize that the money that I gave and the bread and wine brought forward for the eucharist were an offering of myself, *me,* to God. I was, so to speak, there on the altar being transformed in the Eucharistic prayer. To paraphrase a saying of Augustine of Hippo, I began to see that in what I offered, I was myself being offered. The Eucharistic prayer of the *1928 Book of Common Prayer* we used back then (and still use in Rite I liturgies) taught me much about God and myself:

> And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee; humbly beseeching thee that we, and all others who shall be partakers of this Holy Communion, may worthily receive the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son Jesus Christ, be filled with thy grace and heavenly benediction, and made one body with him, that he may dwell in us, and we in him" (BCP 336)

To *present, partake, receive,* and *be made one body:* this was Eucharist worship." (pp. 94-97)

Sin, then, is a failure to present, partake, receive, and thus be made one body,

- A failure in love,
  - A failure to love made manifest by our ***not*** **loosen*ing* the bonds of injustice**
  - A failure to love made manifest by our ***not*** **undo*ing* the thongs of the yoke,**
  - A failure in love made manifest by our ***not*** **lett*ing* the oppressed go free,**
  - A failure in love made manifest by our ***not*** **shar*ing* our bread with the hungry,**
  - A failure in love made manifest by our ***not*** **bring*ing* the homeless poor into our houses; and**

  - A failure in love made manifest in our ***not*** **cover*ing* the naked.**
- A failure to generalize into our daily lives what we experience in the Eucharist;
- A failure for which we are granted unconditional forgiveness by Christ's one, full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice on the cross – the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world,
- A failure we are empowered by God through Christ no longer to commit via. His Holy Spirit.

Today we begin, and throughout the season of Lent we continue, our turn back to God, to Life in Christ, by discovering through reflection and self examination when and how we have turned away from the Sunlight of His Holy Spirit and begun to die, and repenting (turning round about back to life in Christ). And we ask His forgiveness for having so turned away, for having broken our relationship with Him through our breaking our relationships with each other and all of God's creation, for our ***failure to love***. And in the asking we are reminded of His unconditional forgiveness and unconditional love for us made known to us in Christ's life, death, and resurrection, and therefore, to what we are called - to unconditionally forgive and love others as God in and through Christ forgives and loves us made manifest in our:

- **loosen*ing* the bonds of injustice,**
- **undo*ing* the thongs of the yoke,**
- **lett*ing* the oppressed go free,**
- **shar*ing* our bread with the hungry,**
- **bring*ing* the homeless poor into our houses; and**
- **cover*ing* the naked.**

And today, by asking for forgiveness for turning away from the saving nature of God's love for us in Christ, asking forgiveness for breaking our relationships with each other and thus God, asking forgiveness for our failure to give and receive, in our so asking forgiveness we begin our turning round about and moving towards God, towards life, through His example in Christ, to reconcile ourselves with Him through our reconciliation with one another; thereby preparing ourselves to share in His resurrection, His divinity at Easter. ***As God took on our nature so that we might take on His, we now begin to move to do that for which we now pray:***

May God give us the ability to walk in the Sunlight of His Spirit, the Light of the world, the saving nature of His unconditional love for all His creation in Christ; the Light of Christ. May God grant us the ability: **to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, …. to share our bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into our houses; to cover the naked, to not hide ourselves from our own kin; that through us His Light might break forth like the dawn, and His healing spring up quickly; …, That when others shall call out, the LORD through us will answer; when they cry for help, through us, our Lord and Savior will say, *Here I am! Amen!!!***

BLESSINGS and PEACE to ALL!
+MWH

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